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COLOMBIA AND U.S. POLICY: SEEKING A BALANCE

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Colombia and U.S. Policy: Seeking a Balance

Colombia's endless civil war usually hovers at the outer limit of our national consciousness. Policymakers focus on the problem – and commit resources -- only when advancing chaos in Colombia seems to herald an uptick in the supply of cocaine on American streets. This paper argues that our tendency to view the bilateral relationship solely in an antidrug context is misguided and ignores the long-term risk of state failure in Colombia. We should shift to a strategy of sustained engagement, using diplomacy, aid, military assistance and other instruments to press the Colombian government and elites both to restore basic security for all citizens and to address the social and economic problems that underpin both the insurgencies and the drug trade.

While this strategy has a military dimension, we should avoid the evolution of engagement into use of U.S. military force. Direct, substantial U.S. military involvement outside current statutory limits will not advance our long-term goals and should be used only if necessary to protect American lives.

Ends – End Drug Flows or Avoid State Failure?

In its focus on global terrorism, the Administration's national security strategy has defined resolution of the Colombian conflict as a secondary objective under the heading of regional stability. This formulation appears to signal a welcome shift from a focus on narcotics control to a broader view of our interests in Colombia. While drug flows do pose threats to our society and values as a whole, the drug-centric approach has failed either to stem those flows or to address broader threats from instability in Colombia.

We should not overestimate the risk of state failure in Colombia, which has already survived forty years of insurgency and appears untroubled by intractable ethnic

conflicts. However, current trends – an economic slide, rapidly growing non-state actors, loss of control in the countryside, and a mounting spiral of violence – should alarm strategists. A failed state the size of Afghanistan, with 41 million people, in our backyard could harbor global terrorist bases, increase drug flows, or trigger destabilizing northward flows of migrants and refugees, threatening our national autonomy and values. Reports that Hezbollah has established a foothold in the wilder fringes of Paraguay lend credence to the threat that a failed Colombia could become a haven for terrorists.[1]

Our goal, therefore, should be to pursue a strategy -- proportionate to the threat -- to avoid state failure in Colombia and its destabilizing consequences on regional security and on drug flows. No U.S. administration is likely to abandon cocaine eradication and interdiction efforts, despite their clear failure to reduce drug use at home. However, we should assign a lower priority to those efforts.

Political Setting, Constraints and Opportunities

Colombia's Government and Society: Failing or Just Negligent?

Well-endowed with natural resources, Colombia has the potential for solid economic development. Although it has been buffeted by shifts in key commodity prices (oil and coffee), the chief obstacles to economic progress are its glaring economic and political inequalities and ineffective government.

Colombia is regarded as a functioning democracy, but its government has responded primarily to the needs of its elites, and has consistently failed to establish rule of law throughout its territory. In the 40-60% of the country where insurgents and paramilitaries roam freely, the rural poor cannot rely on the state to protect their lives and property or provide basic infrastructure and services. The legal system has failed, among

[1] Speer, p.2

other things, in the critical area of land tenure. Over decades, forced displacement of rural communities by ranching interests, then by drug barons, has pushed many peasants onto unproductive and ecologically fragile land where the only profitable crop is coca, creating both a support base and a solid source of revenue for insurgents and their paramilitary opponents.[2] Others wound up in the barrios, another locus of insurgent activity. As a result, while 30% of the population works in agriculture, 70% of land is now owned by only 3% of landowners. The political system lost balance and legitimacy during the 1980s when right-wing death squads systematically wiped out 3,000 leftist politicians; it has suffered further from the baleful effects of drug money. An economic system notable for gross inequalities in asset and income distribution is one of the results of these political failures.

Economic growth, which had partly mitigated these problems, has sputtered to a halt as Colombia hit its worst economic crisis since the 1930s. As a result, poverty levels are rising again. The World Bank reports that the yawning gap between rich and poor in Colombia, which had begun to narrow, is again growing. The hardest-hit group has been young men, almost 45% of whom are now unemployed.[3] Extreme poverty is also on the rise again, with rates remaining highest among rural residents.[4] Not surprisingly, recruitment into both the left-wing insurgent groups and the right-wing paramilitary has also surged, to an estimated total of up to 40,000.

At the same time, the drug trafficking economy in Colombia has at times overwhelmed the limited capabilities of the Colombian government. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the rise of profit-oriented drug cartels posed the most severe challenge to

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[2] Vargas Meza, p. 2
[3] Colombia Country Brief p. 3
[4] Colombia Poverty Report, p. xii

government and society. While the cartels were eventually decapitated, the lucrative drug trade spawned a new class of rural landowners who helped finance the rise of paramilitary armies (and pushed more peasants off the land), further reducing state control over the countryside. The combined effect of gross social inequity, insurgency, and drug money has been dire; over 3,000 Colombians died at the hands of the insurgents and paramilitary groups last year alone.

The Colombian government faces an uphill battle in restoring internal security. The countryside is dominated by three major groups with ill-defined goals, at war with each other, fuelled at least in part by drug money. Together, they either control or operate freely in about half the Colombian countryside. None is likely to seize control of a critical mass of territory; stalemate and anarchy are more likely than national revolution.

This unholy crew of combatants, and the effective abdication of the Colombian security forces in up to one-fifth of Colombian municipalities, has produced the worst of all possible worlds for rural residents. They risk "taxation", extortion, kidnapping and massacre from insurgents and paramilitaries alike. Under the circumstances, it is difficult to gauge the depth of actual support in the countryside for any given insurgent group. It seems reasonable to assume that most rural residents would accept any authority able to protect them and provide basic services and rule of law.

Colombia's largest and oldest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), has been in existence for over forty years. While the FARC employs traditional Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, its revolutionary fervor may be waning. Most observers believe that FARC's involvement in the drug trade – largely through "taxation"

of coca farmers – has corrupted the lower ranks and that leaders are more interested in sustaining their income and power than in revolution. A smaller insurgent group, the National Liberation Army (ELN) concentrates on attacking infrastructure, such as the Colombian-Occidental oil pipeline, and gets its income mainly from kidnapping.

The third group, although not a traditional insurgency, is the most serious threat to Colombian civil society. The United Self-Defense Groups (AUC) and other right-wing paramilitary groups, originally the private armies of large landowners, have become intimately involved in the drug trade and far outperform their left-wing rivals in the brutality stakes. The AUC is responsible for most murders of civilians in the last five years. Even more troubling, AUC members are believed to have continuing ties with sympathizers in the military.

Uribe's Election: An Opportunity

Lack of political will has been the chief constraint in Colombian efforts to deal with these problems. Colombian elites have long ignored the results of these government failures in the countryside. As long as insurgent groups stayed in outlying areas, Colombian voters were not willing to pay the cost of confronting them. The Colombian government currently collects only 10% of GDP in taxes, a level criticized by the World Bank and others as inadequate to provide basic services.[5] Military expenditures, at less than 2 % of GDP, were also well below what one might expect of a government engulfed in a civil war. While Colombia has a draft, combat exemptions for high-school graduates (mainly the sons of the middle and upper classes) have left only a fraction of draftees available for combat duty.[6]

[5] And less than half the U.S. level. Sweig, p.6
[6] Isaacson testimony, p. 2

The upsurge in violence in the last five years has finally galvanized the voters of Colombia, offering an exceptional opportunity to take strong action. After the failure of President Pastrana's negotiations with the FARC, President Alvaro Uribe took office in the fall of 2002 with a mandate to take an aggressive approach to the growing violence and disorder. In a promising sign, his first act was to impose a tax on the more affluent to raise additional resources for the military. So far, polls suggest that 70-90% of Colombians support his efforts.[7]

The United States

The U.S. has rapidly expanded its presence in Colombia as cocaine production shifted there from Peru and Colombia's internal situation began to deteriorate. Despite our re-engagement with the Colombian military and commitment of up to $2 billion in aid, however, U.S. engagement has been constrained by a number of domestic political concerns, including Congressional wariness about creeping military intervention and concern among human rights groups over Colombian military collusion with the paramilitaries. Above all, U.S. policy in Colombia has been limited and distorted by efforts to focus U.S. aid single-mindedly on antidrug programs, to the extent of explicitly ruling out any action against insurgents with U.S. equipment. Whether this myopic approach really resulted from inescapable domestic constraints or was merely a failure of imagination is hard to say. Since 9/11, however, our changing approach to national security seems to have encouraged the Administration and Congress to view accelerating violence in Colombia as a broader security risk, requiring a more flexible strategy.[8]

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[7] Patterson, p.2

[8] Congressional agreement to lift restrictions of U.S. equipment and intelligence to strict anti-drug operations is a sign that a more holistic approach is likely to be politically acceptable. (Patterson, p.3)

Instruments for Progress in Colombia: Same Means, New Objective

The U.S. already uses a variety of instruments to pursue its antidrug agenda in Colombia. U.S. public and diplomatic support for Plan Colombia was a key element in Pastrana's (not particularly successful) efforts to solicit European contributions. Other instruments have included aid under the auspices of the Andean Regional Initiative, regional trade preferences[9] and our $1.3 billion pledge for Plan Colombia. Colombia is now our third-largest recipient of aid.[10] Military means have also been a key element, in the form of helicopters, training and equipment of elite drug units, the presence of U.S. advisors and an overall rapprochement between the U.S. and Colombian military. Finally, the drug-centric approach included a heavy role for law enforcement, including indictment and arrest of key players, bilateral and international efforts to combat money laundering, and the freezing of drug-related assets. All these instruments can play a role in maintaining our leverage with the Colombian government.

Ways: A Long-Term Engagement Strategy

The U.S. should use a strategy of broad engagement, using traditional diplomacy, public diplomacy, aid, and military assistance, to press the Colombian government both to restore public order and to address the underlying causes of instability.

First, the government should reassert control in rural areas via a more effective army and police force and long-term improvements in infrastructure and communications. It is clear that restoring order quickly, an overriding end in itself, is also prerequisite to longer-term reform. Continuing anarchy will strangle the economic growth and investment necessary to fund the government and return to pre-crisis

[9] …although the Administration allowed these to lapse for almost eight months as part of its trade legislation strategy, a bad omen for any policy that requires sustained attention to Andean priorities…
[10] After Israel and Egypt. Sweig, p.6

unemployment levels.[11] The U.S. should continue to offer training, equipment and intelligence coordination to improve tactical intelligence as well as the leadership, mobility and quality of the Colombian army – effective "force multipliers".[12] In this context, the U.S. should push for passage of measures tabled under Pastrana that would eliminate combat exemptions to increase the number of troops available and distribute the sacrifice more evenly throughout Colombian society. U.S. military assistance should remain at least at current levels, but should be conditioned on a sustained commitment by the Colombians to provide resources for the army and police well above current levels. Uribe's "wealth tax" is expected to provide almost another 1% of GDP, to be used largely on the military and police; we should regard this as a new baseline.

We can also support Colombian military efforts with a diplomatic effort to develop multilateral cooperation. We should encourage border states to engage in intelligence sharing and coordinated military operations to keep Colombian insurgents from sheltering in areas like Panama's Darien region. Effective border cooperation may require continuing U.S. military assistance to neighboring countries.

We must also use U.S. assistance and advisors as leverage to ensure that Colombian forces engage all the parties to the conflict with equal commitment. This is not a given; while the paramilitaries are clearly responsible for most of the worst violence, human rights observers charge that senior Colombian officers have lingering ties with the AUC and other groups, and have been complicit in allowing AUC

[11] Repeated pipeline attacks alone accounted for almost $500 million in lost revenue in 2001 – more than half the projected proceeds of the "wealth tax". Proposed U.S. FMF funding of $98 million to train and equip Colombian pipeline protection forces will more than pay for itself.
[12] Marcella, p. 3

massacres.[13] Uribe himself seems less enthusiastic about pursuing the AUC than the FARC, and AUC supporters are well-represented in the Colombian parliament.[14] We need to exert sustained pressure to ensure that the military campaign does not focus on the FARC and ELN while allowing the AUC to consolidate its grip. In this respect, both the U.S. indictment of AUC head Carlos Castaña and Congressional insistence on human rights certifications for aid to the Colombian military are useful leverage for diplomatic pressure; U.S. leaders should be unequivocal, in private and in public, about the importance of human rights and a tough approach to the AUC. The U.S. should also move aggressively to trace and freeze U.S. assets of AUC supporters and members and counter money laundering by all sides. We should also call for involvement of regional and multilateral organizations such as the OAS and UN in monitoring the situation to discourage government bias toward the AUC.

Second, the U.S. should exert strong pressure on the Colombian government to reduce the appeal of the FARC, ELN and AUC by reducing poverty and inequality. Permanent resettlement of displaced persons, (possibly on land confiscated from drug barons)[15], broader land ownership with secure land title, job-creating infrastructure projects in inaccessible regions, and improved agricultural productivity and diversification are all necessary to provide greater economic security to the poor and to limit the number of people reduced to growing coca on otherwise unproductive plots. The World Bank[16] has urged the Colombian government to invest in "human capital accumulation" by improving basic services that allow the poor to escape the poverty trap:

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[13] Isaacson, "Colombia's Cheap War"
[14] Sweig, p.6
[15] Sweig, p.6
[16] Colombia Poverty Report p. xiii

childcare, education, and increased home ownership are all parts of the equation. At the moment, public social expenditure in Colombia, at 15% of GDP, is below the Latin American average. As fiscal discipline is essential to putting Colombia back on track economically and generating private-sector jobs, additional social spending will require the government to raise taxes further. It is not clear that Uribe's mandate extends this far. A U.S. engagement strategy should ensure that we both focus U.S. development programs on these priorities and use U.S. resources as leverage to produce corresponding Colombian government commitments.

In this context, we should reconsider the current coca eradication program. Following failure of modest U.S.-backed "alternative development" programs, the U.S. advocated, and Uribe enthusiastically adopted, a policy of spraying all coca plots, no matter how small. There is no indication that aerial eradication has any effect on net cocaine supply in the U.S. (which is driven by demand). Small coca plots are usually planted side by side with subsistence crops; spraying kills both, causing hunger and resentment among small farmers. As we move away from a drug-centric approach, the cost in increased hostility outweighs the doubtful benefit of defoliating small coca plots.

Finally, the U.S. should be prepared to offer resources to help demobilize, retrain and reintegrate members of insurgent and paramilitary groups. While the FARC currently rejects reintegration, sustained success by the Colombian military may make reintegration attractive to the rank and file. A necessary corollary to social reintegration is political reintegration. The FARC's unwillingness to demobilize stems from bitter experience with right-wing death squads when it tried reintegration in the 1980s; the Colombian government must commit to ensuring the security and political freedom of

political opposition outside the mainstream parties. One option may be to ask the UN to administer and observe local elections in areas where FARC and AUC intimidation has been rampant. We should also encourage, and fund, truth and reconciliation commissions like those in South Africa. Such a process could help diffuse old grudges and give victims a voice without taking on the impossible task of punishing all the players in an extended and violent civil war.

Will It Work?

Despite accelerating violence, Uribe's tough talk has generated a wave of optimism and support in Colombia. The Colombian military has undoubtedly improved, with U.S. help, over the past few years. The addition of up to $800 million in new resources from the wealth tax, together with broader scope to use U.S. helicopters and intelligence resources in counterinsurgency, could tip the balance enough to allow the Colombian army and police to re-enter and control territory they had abandoned. Improved physical security will ease economic hardship, which falls most heavily on the poor, opening the way to a gradual improvement in opportunity.

Even so, prospects for long-term success are only moderate. Uribe and the political elite, true to form, may lose interest as soon as military pressure improves security in the short term. Organized political support for meaningful economic and social reform, (measures that cost the economic elites real money) will be weak and vulnerable to intimidation. Uribe's zeal to defeat the FARC may wane when it comes to loosening the grip of the AUC and some of its wealthy right-wing patrons. His "democratic security" model, including establishment of a million-strong core of informers, has not reassured human-rights advocates. If Uribe's drive to restore order

deteriorates into military repression without any effort to address the underlying problems that feed insurgency, the effects will be no more than temporary. A key focus of U.S. engagement, and of the international organizations, should be to press the Colombian government to make painful but necessary long-term reforms.

Would Military Force Work?

Use of U.S. military forces in a combat role in Colombia is not under serious consideration right now. As argued above, Colombia has adequate resources to take effective military action against both the insurgents and the paramilitaries if it makes a sustained commitment to do so.

A case could be made for direct military intervention if (1) Colombian forces, despite U.S. training and equipment, proved incapable of retaking national territory; and (2) a continued downward spiral of massive human rights violations and indiscriminate violence threatened state failure, an acute humanitarian crisis and massive refugee flows into neighbors ill-equipped to handle them. One could also argue, in the spirit of the Bush doctrine of preventive war, that acting now might save us from the necessity of a more complex and costly intervention later, after the loss of many civilian lives. U.S. troops are far better trained and equipped than the Colombian army and would enjoy effective tactical air support and advanced technical capabilities not available to Colombian troops. Unparalleled mobility and logistical capabilities could offer quick relief to a suffering population. Equally important, our close cultural ties with Latin America would give the U.S. military advantages it could never hope to enjoy in Vietnam or Afghanistan, such as many talented Spanish speakers to plan and execute an effective civil affairs strategy. A disciplined, impartial outside force, especially in alliance with

troops from other Latin American democracies might even win quicker acceptance than a domestic force tainted by paramilitary ties.

Nevertheless, Congress and the public are right to be wary of such a proposition. Injection of large numbers of heavily armed gringos into a three-way Latin American civil conflict would give full play to the Clausewitzian elements of chance and passion. Unintended consequences could include an upsurge of anti-American nationalism (especially among those whose crops we defoliated earlier), involvement of global anti-U.S. terrorist groups, or a new stalemate punctuated by sporadic guerrilla engagements. Even if Colombia turned out, with a great deal of luck, more like Kosovo than Vietnam, it would entail a massive, long-term commitment. While the lessons of Vietnam, like those of the Bible, are open to interpretation, one point seems to apply: if Colombian leaders cannot muster the resources or the political legitimacy to rule with the consent of the people, we cannot do it for them. To imagine otherwise is to set the stage for a long and arduous occupation, the costs of which would far outweigh our initial security interests in Colombia.

Making the Best of a Bad Situation: A Proposed Strategy for Military Intervention

In this paper, I have argued that we should rule out a broad, sustained use of U.S. military force in Colombian counterinsurgency operations as an overly costly way to protect what are, after all, second-order security interests. Nevertheless, if the engagement strategy fails and other security goals (e.g. protecting American lives) come into play, the situation could conceivably take a turn that would leave no politically feasible alternative to U.S. military force. One scenario: the Colombian military fails to gain control of the entire countryside and to prevent current FARC efforts to massively

infiltrate the cities. At some point, FARC forces, aided by Hezbollah, take over a hundred official and unofficial Americans and other foreigners hostage in Bogota (as the Shining Path in Peru once kidnapped most of the diplomatic corps at a reception), causing a groundswell of anger at home. Other scenarios, such as an acute humanitarian crisis among internal refugees in remote zones, might also lead to involvement of U.S. troops on the ground, with different goals and configurations.

For analysis under this scenario, the following (somewhat arbitrary) critical assumptions apply:

--Despite public indignation, concurrent involvement in long-term operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan and perhaps Iraq severely constrain both resources and public support for a long-term, high-intensity U.S. military operation in Colombia.

--Colombian military forces, while ineffective, have not been annihilated; the central government still functions.

In such a scenario, our paramount short-term political objectives would be to protect the lives of Americans and, in the course of doing so, to help Colombian forces to secure the capital – not much more than restoration of the status quo ante. Longer-term political objectives would have to be reviewed in light of the failure of our engagement strategy. Broadly speaking, the main political objective – the vision of the peace -- should still be restored basic security and democratic rule in Colombia, to be followed by economic, political and social reform to prevent a return to violence. If the Colombian government cannot regain the initiative or loses the remainder of its political legitimacy, negotiated power-sharing by the various parties and UN- or OAS-backed peace enforcement might be an alternative (if less promising) way to reach that goal. In that

case, we would have to consider whether U.S. forces should participate in the peace enforcement operation.

Military Strategic Setting

Essentially, Colombian forces will continue to fight a limited war/war of attrition against guerrillas, with the goal of progressively gaining territory; conventional engagements are likely to be few and far between. U.S. forces would function as part of a coalition with Colombian forces, and ideally, with substantial forces from other Latin American countries, perhaps under OAS auspices. (Of course, assembling these forces would be a diplomatic challenge, but might be feasible if neighboring states feel threatened enough to provide troops and lead the diplomatic charge.) The enemy will remain the existing non-state actors; while they may attract the support of some global terrorist groups, they have no powerful outside state allies. Domestically, both have allies in the domestic population; but both seem to be more feared than loved.

Military Objectives

Colombian military objectives are straightforward: to regain control of the country. Colombian centers of gravity, in addition to its military and police forces, include major cities, ports and the oil pipeline, critical to maintaining revenue.

FARC and AUC military objectives are murkier. FARC's official goal is to lead a revolution in all of Colombia, but its near-term objectives are probably to drive the AUC and government out of as much territory as possible and consolidate FARC rule and income flows in those areas. The AUC appears to be focused on killing as many FARC, ELN and suspected sympathizers as possible while maintaining income from drug traffickers and landowners. (The AUC could coexist with government forces if they did

not interfere in its activities.) It is a real challenge to identify FARC and AUC centers of gravity that U.S. and allied forces could feasibly target. Their fighters are clearly the primary center of gravity, but will be difficult to annihilate. They are non-state actors; their armies are low-tech and well-dispersed in often difficult terrain. Though the FARC holds some towns, neither group depends on cities or an industrial base, or even on broad support of local populations. The drug trade and the income it provides are clearly centers of gravity for both, but the drug trade, a highly decentralized activity with few permanent assets or bases, is not a promising target in the short term.

One vulnerable center of gravity might be transportation routes. Due to 40 years of government neglect, in much of the disputed territory the rivers are the only transport route. Control of the rivers could simultaneously inhibit movement of FARC and AUC forces and squeeze drug income. The aging FARC leadership is another potential center of gravity; in similar circumstances, Peruvian government capture of Abimael Guzman hastened the collapse of the Shining Path. Finally, current FARC efforts to infiltrate cities suggest that poor urban areas are an important center of gravity. For the AUC as well, its leadership – and its paymasters among rural landowners --are additional centers of gravity, but ones that the Colombian forces might be reluctant to target.

For the U.S., centers of gravity that the enemy might try to attack are primarily our military force, including forces on the ground, air support, and communications and logistical chains that give those forces an advantage on the ground. Another center of gravity would be U.S. public support at home; FARC strategists could attack this center of gravity by systematically targeting U.S. soldiers for kidnapping and murder.

U.S. military force alone cannot achieve all our political objectives at an acceptable cost. To avoid an open-ended involvement that exposes our centers of gravity, U.S. strategists should carefully limit military objectives to those which both advance political objectives and can be accomplished within reasonable time and cost limits. U.S. military objectives in the scenario outlined might therefore be:

--Free the hostages;

--Support Colombian forces in regaining control of the capital;

--Continue non-combat assistance to Colombian and other coalition forces, including intelligence sharing, training and equipment, with the ultimate objective of retaking the countryside.

Military Means and Strategic Concept

Attaining these objectives would require a mix of strategic concepts and means: Special Forces to plan and execute a hostage rescue operation; U.S. Army rapid reaction forces to help Colombian army secure control in Bogota in a conventional limited-war operation; short-term tactical air support for U.S. and Colombian forces; and airlift and logistical support for all U.S. personnel, perhaps including use of existing Forward Operating Locations in the Andean region. In the long term, U.S. advisors (if necessary, more than the current limit of 400) would advise and assist Colombian forces in a combined counterinsurgency/nation-building effort that would gradually gain control of territory (progressively denying the enemies access to their resource base) and river transport routes, then consolidate that control by restoration of basic services and civil institutions, including new elected administrations, and humanitarian relief. Advisors might include U.S. civil affairs officers to assist in dealing with local residents, maintain liaison with

NGOs and civil society (many of whom do not trust the Colombian military) and monitor human-rights issues. Regular troops from other Latin American countries, e.g. Brazil, Panama, Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela and perhaps Mexico, could help patrol Colombia's borders and keep FARC from using neighboring countries as a safe haven; the U.S. could offer logistics support, training and other non-combat assistance. U.S. observers with all forces could coordinate information sharing on FARC and AUC movements.

One writer on Colombia[17] argues that effective counterinsurgency operations require at least 10 regular troops for each counterinsurgent. That implies a total force strength of about 400,000, more than double the size of the current Colombian army, to attain Colombia's military objectives against an estimated 40,000 FARC, ELN and AUC fighters. The U.S. and Latin American allies are not going to, and should not, make up this deficit. U.S. strategy should be to avoid large-scale troop commitments. Other allies, also facing severe domestic constraints and threats, are unlikely to offer much more than token support -- a few thousand troops at most.[18] The bulk of the necessary forces will have to come from further mobilization within Colombia.

Costs and Risks

The principal risk of this recommended strategy is that despite coalition support and U.S. intervention, the Colombian government will fail to regain control of its territory, and that continuing anarchy in some or all of the countryside will pose continuing, if indirect threats to the U.S., including increased drug flows. There is also a good chance that meaningful coalition support would fail to materialize, and that the situation would worsen tensions between Colombian authorities and the neighbors,

[17] Marcella, p. 3

[18] Uribe has called for renegotiation of the Latin American defense treaty to include response to insurgencies, but other parties have not offered much support so far. (Oppenheimer and Robles)

notably Venezuela. Failure could also spark a broader social and economic crisis in an already embattled Latin America, with substantial costs to our investment, trade and financial interests. Success poses a different risk – that the Colombian government, having marginalized the FARC and AUC with U.S. help, would go back to business as usual, resisting calls for social reform and setting the stage for the next cycle of violence.

The principal cost would be the expense of the operation, and American and Colombian lives lost. Neighboring countries would bear the brunt of the security and human costs of anarchy in Colombia, and would probably need financial and material help in dealing with refugees. In the long term, yet another in a long line of U.S. military interventions in Latin America would arouse old fears of American imperialism, complicating bilateral relations and hampering efforts to pursue economic integration. These costs could be reduced, however, if we used diplomatic and informational resources to make a strong case for a limited intervention to stabilize the region and prevent suffering, and encouraged Latin American countries to take the lead in planning for regional security.

Conclusion

It is clear that any U.S. military operation intended to restore order in a failed Colombia will be extremely difficult to limit to modest costs in lives and resources. Restored order, moreover, would only be temporary unless we were prepared to undertake sustained nation-building efforts and gain broad support from Colombians.

The prospect of a failed state in Colombia undoubtedly poses some threats to our national security, but we should not respond with efforts disproportionate to the threat. We need to develop a well-balanced engagement strategy focused equally on security and

social reform, de-emphasizing antidrug efforts. If that strategy fails, we should resist the pressure to throw more resources, including military intervention, at the problem. We can address the threats to our security by helping support refugees in the region, managing increased refugee flows into the United States, and securing our borders against terrorists and renewed drug trafficking. Those threats are simply not critical enough to justify a long, costly and probably indecisive military engagement. Unless circumstances change drastically, we should commit to sustained, focused nonviolent engagement with Colombia, but no more.

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